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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (MHAYES, SWILLIAMS)

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SUBJECT: RULING PARTY DEFENDS GRADUAL DEMOCRATIZATION

REF: 08 TUNIS 1059

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) In his first meeting with the Ambassador the new Secretary General of the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) Mohamed Ghariani emphasized the RCD's historical role in Tunisia and defended the party's policy that gradual democratic reform is best for the stability of the country. He said the RCD was still working on its platform for the 2009 elections but that a key issue would be unemployment. Ghariani emphasized Tunisia's support for the people of Gaza and expressed concern that the current situation was weakening Fatah. The Ambassador emphasized the long friendship between the United States and Tunisia, and urged more contact between the RCD and the Embassy. Ghariani indicated a willingness to expand contacts with the Embassy and an interest in developing direct contacts with US political parties. End Summary.

The RCD as Protector of Tunisia's Stability and Evolution

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador met with RCD Secretary General Mohamed Ghariani January 14. Ghariani was appointed as Secretary General by President Ben Ali during the RCD Party Congress in September (Reftel). At the outset, the Ambassador emphasized the long friendship between the United States and Tunisia, which Ghariani warmly welcomed. Discussing the upcoming election, Ghariani explained the RCD's view of its political role as the ruling party. He stressed the party's history, saying the RCD has worked to protect the stability of the country while also providing for gradual political evolution. He said elections are useful as a way of exercising and developing democracy in Tunisia. But, at the same time, the party also had a responsibility to protect the country from the influence of extremism, especially from satellite television. He added the RCD, as the ruling party, has to respect and not underestimate the challenges presented by the opposition parties and work to maintain its own popularity. The RCD's method is to "stay close to the daily life of the people, especially the middle class." He said the RCD makes sure it participates in religious and social events that are important to the people like the Eid holidays and annual "return to school" events.

Contact with the United States

¶3. (SBU) During the meeting Ghariani said he had lived in London and was open to the English/Western system and wanted

to do more to expand relations. The Ambassador used this opportunity to describe the Embassy's outreach and exchange programs and suggested that the Embassy could work with the RCD to develop other projects including possibly establishing contacts between the RCD and US political parties. The Ambassador also urged more contact between the RCD and the Embassy. Ghariani responded favorably and agreed to have Embassy officers work with the RCD to identify areas for future cooperation.

Gaza and Relations with Fatah

¶4. (C) Ghariani raised the issue of Gaza, saying the RCD supports the Palestinian people but that the GOT had taken the decision not to participate in the Arab League Doha summit. The Ambassador said Gaza is a difficult challenge and the US is seeking a durable and sustainable cease fire. He added the US appreciated Tunisia's decision regarding the Doha summit. Ghariani noted Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton had acknowledged in her confirmation briefing that there was a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. He said the RCD tries to take a principled position against any attacks on civilians and that the international community has to find a solution for the civilians. However, he added, even among the Arab countries there is no consensus position. He repeated what many Tunisians have said, that the present situation only encourages extremism. He said he was optimistic that with the new Administration in place next week there would be a new dynamic to end the escalation.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador asked if the RCD had had contact with Fatah recently, given the historical relations between the two parties. Ghariani replied that yes, there had been recent contacts and that he hoped Fatah will regain its power. He said Fatah had lost its place as a national movement and need help in the face of rising extremism. Noting that the Palestinians are in the process of preparing their elections, he opined that Mahmoud Abbas is perhaps being optimistic about his chances. There are risks in the elections and they need to be prepared very carefully, he said. The danger is not just from Hamas, but from other parties as well.

Comment

¶6. (C) The GOT has allowed only limited contacts between the Embassy and the RCD and its members, so this meeting represented an opportunity to try to reverse that trend. Ghariani did not provide any surprises in his comments either on the RCD or on Gaza and Fatah but he nonetheless appears to be more open to the United States than was his predecessor.

Godec